Recapturing Gertrude: The Characterisation of Hamlet's Mother

In Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*

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Submitted for the MPhil in Writing

University of South Wales

Director of Studies, Professor Kevin Mills

May 2019

Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to examine John Updike's characterisation of Gertrude in his *Hamlet*-inspired novel *Gertrude and Claudius*. Chapter 1 presents an overview of EM Forster's and James Wood's contrasting conceptualisations of different types of characters in novels, with particular emphasis on the 'flatness' or 'opacity' of characters. Critical appraisals of the characterisation of Gertrude in Shakespeare's play are then reviewed. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of Updike's characterisation of Gertrude in his novel, with reference to four dimensions of her character: agency, sexuality, motherhood and conscience. To conclude, Chapter 3 presents my reflections on my creative project, a novel that sets a modern retelling of Hamlet in a tradition-bound Cambridge college, in relation to the stubborn opacity of Gertrude's character for authors who attempt to tell her story.

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'Who is Sylvia, what is she?'
- William Shakespeare

Chapter 1

Introduction

Writers create works that are inspired by other writers for many reasons, but one incentive might be to explore neglected or misunderstood characters. For example, one of the most applauded works that comments upon an earlier text is Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), which brings to life two characters who help drive the plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, though they might be seen by most actors as mere walk-on parts.

The plot of *Hamlet* has provided inspiration for a number of writers in a number of genres, producing plays, novels and other curiosities ranging from *Klingon Hamlet* (Hovde, 2016) to *The Lion King*. Contemporary literary novelists such as Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan have tried their hands at reshaping Shakespeare's plot. In Rushdie's story 'Yorick'(1982), it is the jester whose ghost haunts Elsinore, whereas in McEwan's novel *Nutshell* (2016), McEwan's comic reimagining of the events leading up to the death of Hamlet's father is told by Hamlet himself, who is still a precocious foetus with views about the world acquired by listening to his mother listening to Radio 4.

The present paper focuses on a twentieth-century literary novel that was similarly inspired by *Hamlet*, John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2001). Rather than concentrating

attention on minor characters such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Updike produced a work of scholarship and homage to the play that comments upon and attempts to illuminate the character of Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother. The culmination of Updike's novel is the act of betrayal that sets up the tragedy of the play: Gertrude's swift marriage to her late husband's brother immediately after the death of Hamlet's father. My aim in this paper is to examine the characterisation of Gertrude in Updike's text. Before examining Updike's novel, however, it is helpful to reflect on the general topic of characterisation in literary works and then consider some analyses of Gertrude's character within the context of Shakespeare's play.

Different Types of Characters in Novels

In *The Art of Fiction* (1991), John Gardner drew on the reader's familiarity with the plot of *Hamlet* to stress the importance of character in novels, noting that 'The centre of every Shakespearean play, as of all great literature, is character' (Gardner 6). But not all characters evoke the same reactions from readers. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), EM Forster set out a basic dichotomy between 'round' and 'flat' characters. In Forster's categorisation scheme, flat characters are defined by single attributes, which Forster notes is akin to the ancient physician Galen's catalogue of 'humours': according to Galen, an individual might be phlegmatic, choleric or sanguine, depending on the nature of his or her blood. For Forster, flat characters 'are constructed around a single idea or quality; when there is more than one quality in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round' (Forster 65). Forster stressed the fact that such flat characters are very convenient for the writer and the reader: 'they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere – little luminous discs of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars; most satisfactory' (Forster 66-7).

In contrast, round characters are more like actual people living and acting in the world. Forster did not offer a clear definition of what constitutes 'roundness': rather, he merely provided a list of examples that included all the characters in Dostoyevsky's novels, the main characters of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1868) and some Brontë characters, notably Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (1853). However, he also argued that there was a simple test of how round a character might be: 'The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round' (Forster 75). This latter criterion draws attention to the unspoken social contract between author and reader: Characterisation is insufficient if the character only seems round to the author. Convincing yourself as a writer that your character's actions are surprising does not necessarily have the same effect on the reader.

Forster made the strong claim that most of Jane Austen's characters, even the minor ones, are quite round. In *How Fiction Works* (2009), James Wood took issue with this particular claim and, more generally, with the overall utility of Forster's distinction between round and flat characters. Indeed, Wood protested that Forster's dichotomy 'tyrannises us – readers, novelists, critics - with an impossible ideal. "Roundness" is impossible in fiction, because fictional characters, while very alive in their own way, are not the same as real people (though, of course, there are many real people, in real life, who are quite flat and don't seem very round' (Wood 99).

In challenging Forster's distinction between round and flat characters, Wood reflected not on rounded characters' surprising actions but rather on the reader's vantage point—whether the reader could see through a transparent character, as it were, or whether the light bounced back from a character who was opaque. Wood introduced this distinction between transparent and opaque characters by reflecting on the complex Biblical character of King David:

> Despite the many revelations and subtleties of the Old Testament narrative – David's political canniness, his sorrow at the way Saul treats him, his lust for Bathsheba, his grief at the death of his son, Absalom – David remains a public character. In the modern sense, he has no privacy. He hardly ever speaks his inner thoughts to himself; he speaks to God and his soliloquies are prayers. He is external to us because in some way he does not exist for us, but for the Lord. He is seen by the Lord, is transparent to the Lord, but remains opaque to us. This opacity allows for a lovely margin of surprise. (Wood 108-9)

Wood further argued that the opacity of characters and the surprising, not completely comprehensible actions that they might take, was a mark of a transition from theatrical productions to the modern novel: 'The novel begins in the theatre, and novelistic characterisation begins when the soliloquy goes inward' (Wood 107). An author's use of free indirect style might sometimes function in ways analogous to a soliloquy, but it is private, not a public announcement to an audience. Indeed, rather than being members of an audience, whose emotional reactions to a play might be stimulated or suppressed by the surrounding theatregoers, modern readers experience their own private reactions when reading a novel.

The extent to which a given reader might be captivated by a character or immersed in a plot may differ greatly from the experience of another reader; the wide discrepancy amongst readers' reactions to the same novel is attested to daily in reviews on websites such as *Amazon* or *Goodreads*. Furthermore, plays are written to be performed; characters in plays are re-interpreted by different actors. In short, novels are very different from plays and that obvious fact must be considered when writing novels inspired by such a famous play as *Hamlet*. It is therefore important to examine how Gertrude is portrayed in the text of the play itself, before considering her characterisation in Updike's novel.

Gertrude's Character in Shakespeare's Play

In many ways, Shakespeare's Gertrude meets Wood's criteria for an 'opaque character.' Her motives are not apparent; we only can really intuit what they might be from other characters' speculations. This is, of course, far less a problem for a play than a novel. One of the great appeals of *Hamlet* across the centuries is that both son and mother can be interpreted in many different ways, posing a pleasurable challenge for fine actors and clever directors. Nonetheless, on the page, Gertrude remains a puzzle and a mystery. Her back story drives the entire plot; yet we know almost nothing of her motives. Her past is as opaque as her present demeanour.

One of the striking things about the script of the play is that, with the exception of Hamlet, the characters rarely talk about Gertrude in any meaningful way (see Appendix for a list of characters' references to Gertrude in the play). In conventional greetings (e.g., 'My good madam!') she is referred to positively, as 'good' or 'sweet' ('Sweet Gertrude!'). However, there is little specificity in these statements of approbation. Her new husband Claudius hardly mentions her physical features or her psychological traits. Rather, he refers to her in terms of her structural position in the royal family and the Danish court. In Act I, Scene 2, he calls her 'our sometime sister, now our queen,' oddly emphasising rather than playing down the incestuous nature of their new relationship. Somewhat later he refers to Gertrude as Hamlet's 'Queen-mother.' These hyphenated terms seem to underscore her dual obligations to the family and the court. Only late in the play does Claudius reveal the depth of his connection to his former sister-in-law, confessing to Laertes that 'she's so conjunctive to my life and soul, that as the star cannot move but in his sphere, I could not but by her' (4.7.14-17).

In contrast, the reader of the play can have no idea about how Gertrude feels about Claudius. Her hasty marriage could reflect a burst of uncontrolled sexual passion, or panic or a nimble attempt to secure the Danish throne.

Hamlet, for his part, has quite a bit to say about his mother's psychological traits, especially the more undesirable ones. Like Claudius, Hamlet emphasises her structural position in the kingdom of Denmark as well as her roles in the family. In Act III, Scene 4, he ticks off her roles as if it were a job description: 'You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife, and (would it were not so) you are my mother' (3.4.18-19). Earlier, he referred to her as his 'aunt-mother' (2.2.380). During their angry confrontation in Gertrude's closet, Hamlet tells her that she has lost control of her senses, that she is too old to feel sexual yearning and that by marrying her brother-in-law she is 'stew'd in corruption' (3.4.92). However, Hamlet's most well-remembered comment on his mother's poor judgement comes earlier in the play, in Act I, Scene 2, when he is talking behind her back: 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' (1.2.143).

In a seminal essay on Gertrude's character, the literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun argued that critical writing about Gertrude had portrayed her as unintelligent and/or dominated by lust, and most of all overemphasised her moral frailty:

> But the critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word "frailty" as applying to her whole personality, and have seen in her not one weakness, or passion in the Elizabethan sense, but a character of which weakness and lack of depth and vigorous intelligence are the entire explanation. (Heilbrun 201)

In other words, in the writings of these critics, Gertrude is not simply opaque but actually meets Forster's criterion for a flat character, defined by a single characteristic trait: her moral frailty.

Heilbrun went on to contrast these stereotypical depictions of Gertrude as a lustful, silly woman with the evidence within the text for Gertrude's good sense and compassion at key points in the play. She drew on Gertrude's own voice, not just what others said about her. Heilbrun noted that Gertrude often says very sensible things in pithy ways; she only makes a long speech when doing so is a compassionate act of comfort for another character. In other words, in Heilbrun's interpretation, Gertrude is not flat nor is she entirely opaque; she is deliberately self-contained.

A subsequent feminist critic, Dorothea Kehler (1995), argued that the character of Gertrude is unstable across different versions of Shakespeare's texts (the first Quarto, the second Quarto and the Folio), which may or may not reflect different performance histories and differently acted versions of Hamlet's mother. In an essay focusing on early modern views of widowhood and general condemnation of widows who remarry on the grounds of both disloyalty and inappropriate sexuality, Kehler focuses on the character of Gertred in Quarto 1, who is both more submissive and more motherly than the Gertrude of the Folio. Kehler argues that this version of the Queen would be more acceptable to a pre-Reformation audience doubtful of the acceptability of remarriage. Thus, when comparing metafictional representations of Gertrude like Updike's to Shakespeare's original intentions, it is useful to reflect on this variation across texts of the play. Texts change over time and within them the character of Gertrude remains elusive.

Key Dimensions of Gertrude's Character

In ordinary conversation, we use the term 'character' not simply to refer to the representation of people in a play or novel, but also to talk about the features of our personalities and moral natures that we present to the world. Thus, a critical question to ask about a fictional character like Hamlet's mother is, how may we describe her personality traits and her moral character? In the following chapter, I shall examine four dimensions of Gertrude's character,

as they are explored in Updike's novel: her agency; her sexuality; her motherhood; and her conscience. All four of these dimensions of Gertrude's personhood have implications for the role she plays in the subsequent tragedy.

Chapter 2.

The Character of Gertrude in John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*

When John Updike was interviewed about his motivation in writing what he himself termed a 'prequel' to *Hamlet*, he replied: 'The germ of Gertrude and Claudius was my long-term affection for Gertrude. She doesn't have many lines in the play, certainly far fewer than Claudius, but what she does say always struck me as wise, to the point, and temperate' (Reilly & Updike,2002). His words echo Carolyn Heilbrun's description of Gertrude as a sensible, forthright woman (Heilbrun 201), although Updike also admitted being influenced by the actor Julie Christie's portrayal of Gertrude on the screen.

In setting out his own version of the Hamlet family psychodrama, Updike has gone back to the original source material for the story: the Hamlet legend as recounted in Saxo Germanicus's twelfth-century text *Historica Danica*. Updike wears his scholarship somewhat ostentatiously, illustrating how stories change as they are told and retold by changing the spellings of the major character names across the three long chapters of the novel. In the first chapter, he begins with the names found in Saxo Germanicus's text as printed in 1514 and then, in the second chapter changes to the spellings used in an adaptation text by Francois de Belleforest in 1576, and finally adopts those used in the Folio edition of Shakespeare's play. Thus, in Updike's novel, Hamlet's mother is first named Gerutha, then Geruthe, and finally Gertrude. Claudius is first Feng and then Fengon before assuming his Shakespearean name. Hamlet himself begins as Amleth, proceeds to being Hamblet, and finally Hamlet. Only in the final chapter do father and son share the name of Hamlet; in the first chapter Gertrude's royal husband is Horwendil, progressing to Horwendile.

Updike's conceit draws the reader's attention to the elasticity of stories told over centuries and to the artificiality of the exercise that Updike himself is carrying out. The name

changes probably also work against the reader's immersion in the tale being told across the three different sections of the novel. The changing names contribute to the perception of instability in Gertrude's character.

Gertrude's Agency

Agency is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* firstly as 'active working or operation' and secondly as 'working to a means to an end; instrumentality' (*OED* 45). Philosophers have long debated whether human beings can ever experience true agency or whether their actions are predetermined either by their genetic heritage or their social circumstances. The influence of both biology and culture on human actions cannot be denied. However, in the course of evolution we hominids developed a capacity for language and self-reflection, which underpin a sense of *psychological agency*:

> Because human psychological beings are agents who are self-aware and reflective, their courses of action and ways of being are affected not only by the classifications of their societies and cultures, but also by their own conceptions of, and reactions to, such classifications. (Sugarman 13)

As daughter to the King of Denmark, Gertrude has a certain degree of power but only limited agency. As Updike noted, 'The role of a woman in that world was certainly off to the side of the circles where power resides. Even a queen was very much at the mercy of the men in her world' (Reilly & Updike 224).

Gertrude and Claudius begins with the young Princess Gerutha raising objections to the idea of her marrying her father King Rorik's hand-picked successor, Horwendil the Jute, who has recently killed King Koll of Norway and Koll's sister, the female warrior Sela, on the ground that she finds him 'unsubtle' (Updike 10). Rorik is favourably disposed to Horwendil who has permitted Rorik, as his liege-lord, his choice of plunder. Gerutha

enquired, ‘And I am to be the plunder in exchange’ (Updike 12), thus showing her clear awareness that she is not a free agent but rather a key resource for the Kingdom of Denmark. At the same time, she has a level of confidence in her father’s regard that allows her to question his plans for her future.

By comparing herself to the spoils of war, Gerutha is essentially characterising herself as a physical object, not an agent. However, even in those passages of the novel where she is seen as a living, three-dimensional human being, her agency is still constrained, and the metaphor moves from plundered objects to human captive. In Updike’s version of Saxo’s tale, Gerutha’s mother Ona was herself a captive, taken from a Slavic tribe from the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. Because Ona died when her daughter was only three years old, Gerutha must take on faith her father’s claim that the relationship between captor and captive became a passionate marriage, despite the fact that her father tells her that, immediately after he first attempted to take his captured wife to bed, she tried to kill herself with a dagger.

Rorik tries to assure his daughter that, while she must marry Horwendil for reasons of political necessity, her own personal qualities will induce a happy marriage:

> ‘you have displayed an extra quantity of that
> which gives others happiness. Call it sunlight or sense,
> or a sweet simplicity. You cannot help but enamour your husband,
> as you since your infancy have enamoured me’. (Updike 16)

In other words, as an attractive and pleasant Queen of Denmark, Gerutha will have *emotional agency*, a power over others’ feelings if not her own destination in life.

Her emotional power subsequently shows itself in relationships with persons other than her father, including the Lord Chamberlain of her father’s court, Corambus (later Polonius). Oddly, despite her father’s prediction, Gerutha is destined to hold far less sway over her husband and none whatsoever over her only son.

What Rorik had perhaps not anticipated was the fact that, by marrying Horwendil, Gerutha would also embark on a long and complicated friendship with Horwendil's somewhat disreputable younger brother Feng, a pre-Renaissance man with knowledge of many languages and a love of travel. In the tradition of the heroic romances young Gerutha so loved to read, Feng had ranged across Europe, spying for the Holy Roman Emperor and serving as a mercenary south of the Pyrenees. Feng (subsequently named Fengon and finally Claudius) becomes a kind of Othello figure in Gerutha's life, telling her rich stories of strange lands. This characterisation of the King's brother draws on the text of Shakespeare's play: in his afterword to the novel, Updike notes that, in Act 4, a reference is made to Claudius's service as a soldier in foreign lands.

Feng is a complex man and, unlike his elder brother, Gerutha could not accuse him of being unsubtle. He tells her tales of the unknown south and the warm waters of the Mediterranean, which 'is warm enough for a man to swim in pleasurable, if certain transparent bell-shaped creatures do not sting him to death' (Updike 52). Feng's intertwining of a sensual pleasure with mortal risk sets the scene for the dangerous connection between Gerutha and himself that underpins the novel.

Throughout the novel, Gerutha receives several gifts, some of which are living beings. The animate gifts she receives extend the theme of women's captivity. When she becomes betrothed to Horwendil, her future husband presents her with a caged pair of linnets. In his characteristically unsubtle way, Horwendil bangs on the cage to make them sing, saying 'Some day soon, Gerutha, you too shall sing of mated happiness' to which she replies 'I am not sure it is of happiness they sing. They may be crying out at their imprisonment' (Updike 21).

Somewhat later in Gerutha's marriage, after the birth of her son, when her brother-in-law Feng returns from his travels in the South, he invites Gerutha and her entourage to visit

his castle in Jutland and shows her the birds in his mews. Initially, she is not impressed: 'Falconry had always seemed to Gerutha a cruel sport—an abuse of the wild, the perversion of a piece of unfettered nature into an instrument of human amusement' (Updike 67). She tells Feng, '"For some men it is something of a religion, I believe. As with the true faith, women are not ordained as priests"' (Updike 68). Feng points out that only females can be referred to as falcons, noting that '"The male, a tiercel, is a third smaller, with half the fire and natural fury"'(Updike 68). He presents her with a peregrine falcon named Bathsheba, a lethal female captive whose eyes must nevertheless remain sewn shut, to protect her from her own panic at the sight of the outside world. Feng tells Gerutha:

> 'Her talons have been trimmed, and her feet hobbled with bells, so the falconer can hear her slightest move. She is intricate and sensitive and excitable. For her to become a partner to men, she must be constrained, as a baby is swaddled, or as a king is held to his throne throughout a day's sacred ceremony. She has all outdoors in her heart, and we seek to pour her, as through a funnel, into a convenient container.' (Updike 69)

Decades later, when Fengon asks Geruthe whatever happened to Bathsheba, Geruthe replies:

> 'We were not a good match, Bathsheba and I. Her eyes, unseeled, took in too much, and she was forever baiting—that is the word?—at bright objects in my chamber as they caught the sun…I could not reason with her.' (Updike 90)

Shortly after this conversation, Geruthe exerts her own agency, persuading her father's loyal Chamberlain Corambis to help her fit up an old hunting lodge as a place where she could be on her own, studying devotional texts without her husband's knowledge. The

lodge, of course, turns into the site where Fengon and Geruthe's intellectual chats transmute into romantic assignations.

At the end of Chapter 2, after his Calabrian manservant Sandro has told King Horwendile about Fengon's and Geruthe's adulterous liaison, Fengon murders his sleeping brother. When portraying how Fengon takes this decision, Updike returns to the metaphor of falconry:

> …he had no idea what he must do, only that he must stop at nothing. Like a tiercel aloft his mind glided, motionless, with black unhooded eyes, each patch of earth below magnified by its subdivision into many quickly perceived coverts, where life might lurk. (Updike 153)

In asserting his own agency, Fengon thus identifies himself as the smaller male tiercel, paired with the larger, but vision-obscured, female falcon. Geruthe's agency is shown in her initiating the intimate relationship with her brother-in-law, but I would argue that it is Fengon's agency that leads to the eventual tragedy. This view stands in contrast with another critic's view of Updike's novel; Laura Elena Savu (2003) blames the tragedy on Geruthe's acknowledgement of her own sexual nature.

Gertrude's Sexuality

John Updike is well known as a writer whose stories feature the phenomena of sex, love, marriage and adultery, as illustrated by his 1969 novel *Couples* and his 1979 story collection *Too Far to Go*, which traces the history of a couple from the early days of their marriage to their farewell kiss in divorce court. It is therefore not surprising that he was drawn to the puzzle of Gertrude's carnal relationship with her husband's brother. It is also not surprising that he portrays Gertrude as a sensual woman who is well acquainted with her own sexual desires.

Updike is at pains to show that, even when the characters of Gertrude and Claudius have reached what would in medieval Denmark be a considerable age, their relationship is fundamentally based on sexual desire, not political ambition. Indeed, in her feminist analysis of *Gertrude and Claudius*, Savu argues that the two motives are intertwined; in her view, it is Gertrude's susceptibility to lust that drives the tragedy, partly because Gertrude's lust facilitates Claudius' ambition (Savu 21). Furthermore, Savu suggests that it is Gertrude's sexuality that actually promotes her agency:

> In positing the erotic drive as an empowering element in the dynamics of gender relations, Updike implicitly takes a critical aim at the male fantasy through which woman is either objectified or idealized and which denies her both agency and voice. The narrative resists identifying the masculine as simply active and creative and the feminine as passive and receptive; by the same token, it subverts Freud's claims, according to which the subject of desire is male and the object of desire is female. (Savu 30)

In Shakespeare's play, it is Gertrude's son who appears to find her interest in a sexual relationship with Claudius quite unnatural for a woman of her advanced age. In Hamlet's confrontation with his mother in Act III, Scene 4, he seems genuinely curious about her motives, given that he finds it impossible to believe that they are sexual or romantic: 'You cannot call it love; for at your age, the heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble, and waits upon the judgement…' (3.4.70-2).

However, in retelling the story of Gertrude's relationship with Claudius, Updike portrays a sexually curious young princess who eventually becomes a mature woman who enjoys the physicality of her adulterous relationship with her husband's brother. In Chapter

1, based on the early Saxo Germanicus text, Gerutha's initial qualms about marriage to the unsubtle Horwendil are reduced in his physical presence. Somewhat disingenuously, she tries to explain why she has her doubts about agreeing to the marriage arrangement, saying: '"I find…no fault in your brave person, but in your approach to me, from on high, through the old sympathy of our fathers. I feel something of the pat and coldly expedient. I am just yesterday a girl, sir, and put forward my girlish qualms blushingly"' (Updike 22).

Horwendil laughs at this all too knowing presentation of innocent girlhood and his laugh makes her see him differently: '…a confident laugh, already possessive, exposing short, neat, efficient teeth. His rough pleasure quickened her blood with a pulse anticipatory of her being, her qualms crushed, thoroughly his' (Updike 22).

Nonetheless, in the next few sentences in the same paragraph, her thoughts quickly move from sex to sacrifice to violence:

> Was this the self-abdicating delight her nurses and serving women had already experienced and absorbed?—the complacence of the submissive prey, the female pressed into the mattress and basted like a spitted chicken between the fires of the nursery and of the kitchen. (Updike 22)

Thus, for the young Gerutha, speculation about sex with her future husband is bound up with images of lack of agency and objectification.

Later, on their wedding night, when Gerutha's attendants remove her clothes in preparation for the marital bed, she becomes captivated by her own naked body, ready for the taking; unfortunately, Horwendil has already fallen asleep and the politically important bloodied sheet cannot be shown to the priest, the doctor and the royal scribe until the next morning. As the marriage continues, Gerutha continues to perceive Horwendil's attentions as somewhat impersonal and abstract: 'it was but an aspect of his general vigour. He would

have been lusty with any woman' (Updike 32). This mirrors her earlier assessment of Horwendil when the prospect of the marriage had first been mooted. She tells her father:

> '"In our fleeting contacts, Horwendil has treated me with an unfeeling, standard courtesy—as a court ornament whose real worth derives from my kinship with you. Or else he has looked through me entirely, with eyes that see only the rivalrous doings of other men."' (Updike 11)

Some years into her marriage, after Gerutha's brother-in-law Feng has returned from his long travels in the South, Feng provides her with a metaphor to describe her husband's personality and the nature of their sexual relationship. Talking about his brother, Feng confides '"I used to call him the Hammer. Dull, but he hit you square on the head."' And Gerutha reflects that she literally feels hammered by her husband 'on the days after she and the King had made love—hammered into a somewhat blissful submission, nailed down, dispatched' (Updike 52).

Near the end of Part 1, the narrative switches to Feng's point of view, in free indirect style. This allows Updike to describe Gerutha's thirty-five-year-old body and its socially inappropriate effects on Feng's desires. As a trusted brother-in-law Feng is permitted to eat breakfast with his brother and his brother's wife,

> …she in an unbelted gown not so long it hid the bareness of her feet, a pink bareness implying an entire body flushed still with the languid heat of sleep just shaken off, pink on the sides and white in the toes and at her bare heels thickened to a tallowy tint, Gerutha's whole body a flexible candle carrying the pale unconstrainable flame of her hair. (Updike 77)

By means of this rather heavy-handed device of switching to a male point of view, Updike tells the reader that he is not simply portraying an interesting friendship between articulate

and intelligent people; sexual attraction is definitely involved. After some exchanges between Feng and Gerutha, who are both familiar with the conventions of courtly love in the romances they both enjoy reading, Feng takes himself out of the situation, back to the safe dangers of the South.

It is several years later, in Chapter 2, when Feng and Gerutha have transmuted into Fengon and Geruthe, that they become romantic conspirators. At this stage, Geruthe takes the initiative by setting up their base of operations in the old hunting lodge, implicating her father's chamberlain and her own loyal lady's maid into her adulterous activities. Fengon presents Geruthe with gifts, including a peacock pendant and a silver chalice that unsubtly depicts snakes and apples, thus equating Geruthe's sexual curiosity with Eve's illicit quest for knowledge. Finally, Fengon presents Geruthe with a silken cloth of many colours, another Biblical allusion, this time a reference to a brother's betrayal. Thus, the depiction of what is in many ways an amiable and fun sexual relationship—they joke about their ageing bodies—is underwritten with images of pride, deception and murder.

Gertrude's Experience of Motherhood

By focussing so intently on Gertrude's sexual relationships with her husband and her husband's brother, Updike essentially sweeps her relationship with her son out of the narrative. This is in line with Updike's characteristic approach to contemporary family relationships, where his interest seems to be in marriage rather than the family. For example, in Updike's linked story collection *Too Far to Go*, a married couple's four children have walk-on parts that provide commentary on their parents' marriage. In *Gertrude and Claudius*, Gertrude's relationship with her only son is marked by a nearly complete lack of interest on both their parts. Throughout most of *Gertrude and Claudius*, the mother-son relationship is marked by mutual coldness, which stands in contrast to the volatile and, in some eyes, sexualised interactions between mother and son in the text of Shakespeare's play.

In Chapter 1, Gerutha feels little attachment to her son, who has a closer relationship with his father. Gerutha had wanted to name her son Rorik after her own father, partly to cement his claim on the Danish throne, but instead the newborn Amleth was named to honour his father's victory over Fortinbras of Norway, marking him from the beginning as his father's son. The infant Amleth was a colicky baby and sickly child. Gerutha felt that he '…found her milk sour—at least, he cried much of the night, digesting it, and even as his mouth fastened onto her stinging breast he wrinkled his nose in disgust' (Updike 39). The ailing infant eventually grew into an overly imaginative, self-dramatizing child, whose only attachment seemed to be to the demented court jester Yorick.

In the early years of Amleth's childhood, Gerutha reflected on her own lack of attachment to her child, drawing on many of the themes that appear in twentieth century theories of mother-infant attachment (e.g., Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969):

> Her heart felt deflected. Something held back her love for this fragile, high-strung, quick-tongued child. She had become a mother too soon, perhaps; a stage in her life's journey had been skipped, without which she could not move from loving a parent to loving a child…She wondered if her own motherlessness was discovered by the gaps of motherly feeling within her. (Updike 40)

Contemporary research would refute Gerutha's explanation of her lack of love for her son; a secure attachment to at least one parent, such as the bond between Gerutha and her father Rorik, might be expected to promote attachment to one's children. Rather, Gerutha's alternative hypothesis, that she and Amleth are temperamentally incompatible, seems more plausible:

> …perhaps the fault was in the child: as water will stand up
> in globules on a fresh-waxed table or on newly oiled leather,
> so her love, as she felt it, spilled down upon Amleth and remained

> on his surface, gleaming like beads of mercury, unabsorbed.
> He was of his father's blood—temperate, abstracted,
> a Jutish gloom coated over with the affected manners and luxurious
> skills of a nobleman. (Updike 40).

Yet the reader is left to wonder if the Jutish gloom in the temperament of a child conceived with Feng would have the same distancing effect on Gerutha's heart.

Amleth remains an only child, a fact that troubles Gerutha and also worries her loyal counsellor Corambus, her father's chamberlain. '"The lack of children leaves a woman too idle," he pronounced, "especially if her husband rules a scattered island kingdom, with miles of coast bare to foreign assault"' (Updike 44). He tells Gerutha that, because she has failed to conceive more children, she reads too many romances and has grown heavy, not just in body but in spirit.

In Part 2, Geruthe thinks about her son from time to time, but he remains far away from home, living the student life in Wittenberg. It is in Chapter 3, when Hamlet returns to Elsinore after his father's death, that the mother-son relationship grows more complex, not least because Gertrude has now married Claudius, who has assumed the kingship of Denmark. Claudius is very annoyed that Hamlet has only made a perfunctory visit back to Elsinore for his father's funeral and is now spreading unsubstantiated rumours about his father's ghost. Claudius also is deeply sceptical about the intellectual influences on Hamlet during his years in Wittenberg: '"Professors professing seditious doctrines—humanism, usury, market values, the monarchy as something less than the pure gift of God"' (Updike 166). He even has his doubts about whether Hamlet really is in Wittenberg or has taken up residence somewhere else, anywhere but Elsinore, now that Claudius has been crowned king.

To these speculations Gertrude sadly replies, '"It's not you he's avoiding. It's me.'" She then confesses, '"I'm glad the child isn't at Elsinore. He would sulk. He would try to make me feel shallow, and stupid, and wicked'" (Updike 167).

Thus, at this stage in their lives, Gertrude's relationship with her only son is an unmitigated disaster. However, she now directs some maternal sensitivity toward another young person, the daughter of her father's chamberlain (the former Corambus, now called Polonius). It is clear that Gertrude identifies with Ophelia as a motherless child like herself, telling the girl that: '"You need not call me 'Majesty,' nor can you quite call me 'Mother,' though I would like to serve you, in the absence of a mother, with kindness and advice. I, too, had a mother early dead, leaving me to make my way in a world of stone and men's clamour'" (Updike, 182).

Gertrude's positive regard for Ophelia seems emotionally genuine, although of course she is also attempting to find out exactly what is going on between her son and this young woman. In response to Gertrude's probing questions, Ophelia confesses her love for Hamlet, even though he is by no means an easy boyfriend:

> 'Hamlet can be infinitely tender, as if I might break…all of the time,
> when we are together, but or when he is thinking of some unnamed other,
> or of our sex in general. He hates the species, he says, but loves the individual.'
> (Updike 165-6)

Gertrude dismisses Hamlet's thinking as 'Too much German philosophy' (Updike 187). However, as she contemplates the complicated relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia, she 'felt a kinship with her son…Poor boy, born like herself into the fine-grinding mill of Elsinore' (Updike 193).

Updike's novel ends at the point in time when Shakespeare's play begins, after Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, when they ask Hamlet to remain in Elsinore. Therefore, we

do not see the complexities of the mother-son interactions that are portrayed in the play itself—neither the conflict between them nor Gertrude's compassion toward her son that leads to her own death by poison. The final pages of the book are told from the point of view of the new King Claudius, and so we do not learn whether Gertrude is optimistic or pessimistic about her future relationship with her son. She has once again become an opaque character.

Gertrude's Conscience

In the early Danish world that Updike has created, in a period of transition between allegiance to the Norse gods and the new attractions of Christianity, Gertrude has had little opportunity for a moral education. Her beloved father was a warrior, her mother a foreign captive who died too soon, her first husband a man renowned for tricking another man to death. After her mother's death, the child Gerutha lived in the free-and-easy court of a widower king. As an adult, she reads romances and has heard rumours of German philosophy, but she only rarely shows a concern with right and wrong. Periodically she shows some empathy and compassion, but only occasionally reveals the prickings of her own conscience. For example, in the hunting lodge, Fengon begins to tell Geruthe about his negative reactions to Byzantine Christianity:

> 'Their churches, unlike our own, with their clean smells of cedarwood and mistletoe, stank of sickly incense, of rancid chrism and the drippings of votive lamps. Lunatics and saints were indistinguishable in Byzantium, as were bishops and assassins—their morbid religiosity made me long for the simplicity of our fresher, barer faith, which deals less with outer show than with inner purity.'

Geruthe replies, '''I wonder you and I dare talk of purity"' (Updike, 112).

Updike's description of emotional compassion while reporting only a few comments that indicate a deeper moral understanding is in line with the portrayal of Gertrude in Shakespeare's play. In the play, she demonstrates empathic concern for Ophelia, for Laertes' bereavement, and ultimately for her son's wellbeing, but does not express any guilt for what happened to her husband or even any survivor's guilt that she has moved so swiftly into another marriage.

Updike's depiction of Gertrude's feminine morality resonates with twentieth-century debates about stages of moral development. In an influential theory, Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) posited a sequence of six stages proceeding from primitive self-interest to intelligent, self-defined principles of morality (or as one behaviourist of my acquaintance once described it, 'Stage 6 is Stage 1 with a good vocabulary').

Hardly any study of moral development has found good evidence for Stage 6 moral reasoning. What has attracted more controversy is the distinction between Stage 3 reasoning (where value is placed on interpersonal relationships) and Stage 4 reasoning, which focuses more on issues of law and justice. The theorist Carol Gilligan (1977) challenged Kohlberg's hierarchical theory from a feminist perspective, arguing that women as opposed to men might focus more on the importance of relationships than legal frameworks and doing so does not equate to less mature moral understanding. The empirical evidence for Gilligan's proposal of gendered morality is mixed; however, Updike's portrayal of Gertrude's empathy coupled with less attention to general moral principles reflects Gilligan's account of a distinctly feminine form of morality.

In Shakespeare's play, Gertrude's culpability in her husband's death is unclear; the ghost describes the murder but does not accuse Gertrude directly. When interviewed, Updike notes that there is no direct evidence in the text of the play that Gertrude has had a hand in her husband's murder:

> I agree that Shakespeare is a bit vaguer than we would prefer.
> But I see nothing in his Hamlet which would suggest that she
> knew anything about what had really happened to her first husband.
> For example, if she had been in on the plot, or had had any sense
> of Claudius's guilt, she wouldn't have so innocently seized the
> poisoned chalice at the end. (Reilly & Updike, 222-3)

In the text of *Gertrude and Claudius*, Updike explicitly reveals that Gertrude was not directly complicit in her husband's murder, which takes place behind her back, although clearly her illicit affair with her brother-in-law was a precipitating factor in the crime.

In the aftermath of the King's murder, Gertrude responds emotionally as usual, rather than expressing any direct feelings of guilt. In Chapter 3, she expresses some confused feelings and signs of an uneasy mind, but she does not overtly question the reasons for her husband's death. She does, however, display some magical thinking, connecting her own duplicitous behaviour with her husband's encounter with his fate:

> Though she had been bold and brazen enough in placing herself
> at a lover's disposal while still wedded to the King, when the
> ruthless irregularity of her behaviour could be lightly scanned by
> her conscience as the enactment of a romance such as had beguiled
> her betranced days of married boredom, her escapade took on
> a live soreness since the King's death: she felt her fall had somehow
> caused the adder in the orchard to sting the sleeping cuckold. (Updike 171).

Gertrude also ruminates about the strange disappearance of Claudius's Calabrian manservant Sandro, who has left her own servant miserably pregnant. However, none of these worries induce her to feel guilty about her past deceptions or to accept personal responsibility for her

husband's death. Rather, the widowed Gertrude wants all the uncertainty in her life to disappear:

> …it would be good to bundle and hide the whole affair—the lakeside lodge, the small troop enlisted in their deceit, the hectic gratification of belonging to two men at once, the pagan shamelessness—within the unimpeachable, unbreakable contract of a royal marriage. (Updike 171)

To Gertrude, the minor scandal of a quick marriage is less disturbing than the ambiguous situation she finds herself in after her husband died.

It is her son's reactions to her behaviour following his father's death that induce a small amount of guilt in Gertrude's uneasy mind, although she puts the blame on both the younger and the elder Hamlets. She tells Claudius that.

> 'My grief wasn't enough to suit him. I didn't want to die myself—to throw myself on his father's pyre, so to speak, though of course they don't have pyres any more, that was barbaric, those poor drugged slave girls…And I couldn't stop myself from thinking that now there was no chance of Hamlet's, my husband Hamlet's finding out about *us*. I dreaded that, though I pretended not to, I didn't want to worry you. I was relieved. I hate myself, admitting it. Even dead, Hamlet has a way of making me feel guilty, for being less good and public-spirited than he was' (Updike 167).

This passage suggests that Gertrude has the capacity for minor feelings of guilt, but they are overtaken by her anger at her son. Despite her demonstration of empathy to other people in her life, it does not seem to occur to her to feel compassion for her son's loss of his father. In

this respect her portrayal is not completely in line with the relationship-focused feminine form of morality described by Gilligan.

In general, Gertrude's emotional rather than conscience-driven reaction to the event of her husband's death seems to reflect a general tendency to process her world in terms of emotion and sensory experience, not moral or religious principles. She has never truly forgiven her son for the pain she experienced in childbirth: 'He had hurt her so much, being born. No person had ever hurt her as Hamlet had' (Updike 174). And, perhaps because she reacts with her senses, not moral reasoning, Updike's Gertrude appears to see some vestiges of her husband's ghost:

> King Hamlet in Gertrude's sense of him became almost palpable, quickening all of her senses save that of sight, her ears imagining a rustle, a footstep, a stifled groan, the nerves and fine hairs of her sixth sense tickled and brushed by some passing emanation, though the corridor was windless, and no newly snuffed candle or fresh-lit fire could account for the whiff of burning, of smoke, of char, of roasting. And upon this sense was visited an impression of pain; he seemed, this less than apparition but more than absence, to be calling her name, out of an agony. (Updike 196).

Almost despite herself, the widowed and then remarried Gertrude cannot escape from a sense of dread, a emotional reaction she can barely understand. After her marriage, she asks Claudius, '"Still, my dear husband, why do I have this dread?"'

Claudius laughs and replies:

> 'You have acquired, my sweet Gertrude, what the rest of us are born with or soon acquire, an unease of the soul. You have ever been too much at home in the world. This unease, this guilt for our first father

and mother's original sin, is what calls us to God out of our unholy pride.'

(Updike 203)

But, at that point in the narrative, Claudius believes that he has got away with fratricide. His difficult stepson has not yet returned to Elsinore.

Chapter 3.

Conclusion: Who Is Gertrude, What Is She?

My novel *His Very Madness* resembles Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* insofar as, like Updike, I aimed to explore and understand Gertrude's motives leading up to her first husband's death. Three years ago, at a writing conference in Virginia, when I had drafted two chapters and was just beginning to feel my way into the world of the novel, I had a helpful conversation with the American novelist Robert Bausch. He was delighted with the idea of focusing the book on Gertrude, noting that most people attempting to retell the story of Hamlet would prefer to focus on Ophelia. He then told me, he'd give me five years to finish the novel or he would steal the idea and write it himself.

Three years and twelve drafts later, I still feel that I know Ophelia somewhat better than Gertrude. In James Wood's words, my rendition of Gertrude remains somewhat opaque, to the extent that I now wonder if opacity is not the central feature of her flat character, in the play and in the many other works the play has inspired. Perhaps Gertrude will always be unknown. *Perhaps she doesn't want to be known*. The question then becomes, why is she hiding?

Retelling another person's story in some ways resembles solving a problem in geometry. The new storyteller starts with axioms—the assumptions that tie the new story to the original text— and proceeds to test new theorems, the ideas that will drive the new storyteller's plot. In the case of my novel, I began by assuming that any retelling the story of *Hamlet* required characters to be entrapped in a closed community, separated from, though sometimes affected by, the outside world. What might be a contemporary version of feudal, tradition-bound Elsinore?

I first had the idea for *His Very Madness* in a taxi, riding home from a book club discussion of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Before I reached my front door, I had

already decided it would be set in a conservative Oxbridge College with a history of nepotism, both for the Fellows and the College servants. In Updike's vision of medieval Denmark, Gertrude grew up in Elsinore, the daughter of the present King and is therefore a woman whose life has always been supported by entrenched male power. In contrast, I immediately saw my own version of Gertrude as the other: an outsider, a Katherine of Aragon figure, the foreign princess brought into the castle to marry the heir to the throne.

Following on from that image, I decided my version of Gertrude would enter the College from the New World; she'd be American. I'd test the theorem that an uncultured American girl marrying into the Masters' family in a hidebound Cambridge College would lead to tragedy. What I have only recently understood is that my version of Gertrude is in many ways the kind of character who is more likely to appear in a novel by Henry James than a play by Shakespeare. She is a catalyst more than a protagonist. In the last stages of writing my novel, I have found it helpful to reread James' description of Isabel Archer's arrival into England in *Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

Of course, novels are not essays or treatises; they may derive from an idea, but they must represent the thoughts and actions of characters who seem like real people. Any retelling of someone else's work must have an integrity of its own. All the works that pay homage to *Hamlet* must tell a story that relates to but is not identical to the source material. The new story must be rooted in a fictional place that is described with enough sensory details that it becomes its own reality. In the earlier novels that I have written, I always began with a visual image—a teenage girl sitting in the front of her English class, face-to-face with a crab, or a strange baby abandoned on the Gorsedd stones in Cardiff's Bute Park. My writing of *His Very Madness* began in the same way, with a visual image (derived from a personal memory) of a young American woman at a Cambridge May Ball, being jounced

about on top of a mechanical bull. That image told me who my Gertrude was: a girl from North Carolina who was not afraid to go on a carnival ride.

I also decided that, like many Southern girls, she had been given a family surname for her Christian name. I named her True. Throughout the novel, even though True grew up in the Southern culture of polite fabrication of the truth in social situations, she is fundamentally a truth-teller. When she can't tell the truth, she resorts to silence.

Shakespeare's Hamlet portrays the complex fallout from an important death. In Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*, the emphasis is on the events leading up to that death; it is planned but not yet executed by the end of the novel. The main challenge I faced in writing my novel was the choice I made to try to intertwine two narratives, the events following True's husband's death (told in present tense through the point of view of True's adult son Hal) with, in Updike's words, the 'prequel' of twenty years of True's marriage and family life (told in past tense, from both True and Hal's points of view).

The structural complexity of these intertwined narratives requires a developmental perspective when portraying True's character; I needed to show both her personal growth from American college girl to a Cambridge Master's wife from her own point of view as well as portray her perplexing behaviour following her bereavement from her son's point of view. As in Shakespeare's play, True's life is challenged by her complex relationships with two argumentative brothers and a demanding son with his own mental health issues. She has limited agency in the foreign country she now inhabits. In some ways, the world of the College and more broadly the expectations of upper middle class English society have forced her into a kind of captivity.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gertrude keeps the secret of her own true motives closely guarded, but occasionally she speaks the truth, as she understands it. She worries aloud about her troubled and troublesome son; she reacts compassionately toward Ophelia. She struggles

to understand her son's rantings about her current marriage and his uncle's motives; her last act is to try to comfort her son.

In contrast to that canonical character, my version of Gertrude is more damaged by her husband's death. She faces financial complications, an uncertain future, and an angry son. She has no romantic feelings for her husband's brother, but he has been her most loyal friend over the last twenty years. She must decide whether or not she should still rely on his support, given that his romantic feelings for her have come out into the open when he made a clumsy pass at her, soon after her husband's death. However, because the present timeline is narrated from her son's point of view, her motives and the nature of her relationship with her husband's brother are not immediately apparent to the reader, no more than they are to her increasingly agitated son.

Perhaps in any retelling of *Hamlet*, Gertrude will always seem opaque because she invariably responds to the immediacy of the situation. She never plans her future actions and merely falls into the plans of others. It may be fundamentally the absence of goal-directed agency that makes her a puzzling and elusive character for future writers, for John Updike as well as for myself.

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Appendix: References to the Character of Gertrude in *Hamlet*

Act and Scene	Speaker	Reference to Gertrude
I,ii	Claudius	'our sometime sister, now our queen'
I, ii	Hamlet, referring to his parents' relationship before his father died	'Why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown and yet within a month…Let me not think on't'
		'Frailty, thy name is woman!'
		'A beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer'
I, v	The Ghost, speaking to Hamlet	'my most virtuous-seeming queen'
		'howsoever thou pursuest this act, taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven and to those thorns that in her bosom prick and sting her.'
		'O, most pernicious woman!'
II, ii	Polonius	'Good madam'
		'My dear majesty your queen'
	Hamlet	'the good king and queen'
		'my aunt-mother'
III, i	Claudius	'Sweet Gertrude'

	Claudius, speaking to Polonius about Hamlet	'Let his Queen-mother all alone entreat him to show his grief'
III, ii	Hamlet, declining to sit down next to his mother	'No, good mother, here's metal more attractive'
	Hamlet, to Ophelia	'Look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours'
	Guildenstern to Hamlet	'The Queen, your mother, in most great affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you.'
	Rosencrantz to Hamlet	'Your behaviour hath struck her into amazement and admiration'
	Hamlet to Rosencrantz	'We shall obey, were she ten times our mother'
III, iv	Hamlet to Gertrude	'You question with a wicked tongue'
		'You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife, and (would it were not so) you are my mother'
	(in response to Gertrude's question as to what she did to make her son so ill-behaved)	'Such an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty; calls Virtue hypocrite; takes off the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love and sets a blister there'
	Hamlet to Gertrude	Have you but eyes? You cannot call it love; for at your age, the heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble, and waits upon the judgement…Sense sure you have, else could you not have motion; but sure that sense is apoplex'd; for madness would not err, nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrilled but it reserved some

		quantity of choice to serve in such a difference…Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all, or but a sickly part of one true sense, could not so mope. Oh, shame! Where is thy blush?
	Hamlet in response to Gertrude's request that he stop talking	'to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty!'
	Ghost to Hamlet	'But look, amazement on thy mother sits. O, step between her and her fighting soul'
	Hamlet in response to Gertrude's cry that he has broken her heart	'O, throw away the worser part of it, and live the purer with the other half. Goodnight, but go not to my uncle's bed. Assume a virtue, if you have it not.'
	Hamlet in response to Gertrude's asking him what she should do; he tells her to tell Claudius that Hamlet is not really mad	'Twere god you let him know; for who's that but a queen, fair, sober, wise, would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib, such dear concernings hide? Who would do so? No, in despite of sense and secrecy, Unpeg the basket on the house's top, Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape, To try conclusions, in the basket creep and break your own neck down.'
IV, v	Hamlet to himself	'How stand I then, that have a father killed, a mother stain'd'
	Ophelia to Gertrude	'Where is the beauteous Majesty of Denmark?'

IV, vii	Claudius to Laertes, in reference to Hamlet	'The Queen, his mother, lives almost by his looks…she's so conjunctive to my life and soul, that as the star cannot move but in his sphere, I could not but by her.'
	Claudius to Laertes, after Hamlet has foiled the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern plot to assassinate him; plotting another attempt	'But even his mother shall uncharge the practice and call it accident'